

Christianity's Dirty Words

#4 – Sin

Jan. 28, 2007

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The whole impetus for this sermon series on “Christianity’s Dirty Words” was a conversation I had with a congregation member about the word “sin.” I had just preached a sermon on the concept of sin and salvation, going into great detail to explain the biblical understanding of sin and our need to be saved from it. It wasn’t quite fire and brimstone, but I thought it got the job done with a minimal amount of squirming.

So imagine my surprise when, during Coffee Hour, I was accosted by this church member who said, “I just want you to know that I didn’t even listen to your sermon.” Now, I hear that often enough to not be too shocked, but the vitriol with which she shared her statement startled me.

She said, “As soon as you said the word ‘sin,’ I just stopped listening. I was beaten over the head with that word so much growing up that I just can’t hear it anymore. When I hear it I get very angry, and you said that word 67 times.” At which point she kicked me in the shin and stole my Bible.

Her perspective got me thinking about how biblical words had been co-opted and redefined by the culture – or even by other Christians! – and how we need to reclaim the original meanings so they can inform our faith instead of send us running. And that’s what led to this sermon series. So to the woman who tuned me out last time, please give me another chance.

The word “sin” has truly become a bad word, hasn’t it? The word is pervasive in the Bible appearing over 400 times. In the book of Romans alone, Paul uses the word 77 times. Understanding the concept of sin is fundamental to understanding what it means to be a Christian. If that’s the case, why did this woman, and many, many other people like her, get so turned off by this word? When I told someone about this sermon series, she looked at me and said, “You’re going to preach on sin?” Why do people react so strongly to this word that’s so fundamental to our vocabulary of faith?

That’s a simple question with a very complex answer. To get to the bottom of it, we need to first see how our culture at large uses the word “sin.” That’s easy enough: it doesn’t. The word “sin” isn’t a part of our larger vocabulary. How often do you hear, “I went to the grocery, stop by the post office, and then sinned for awhile”? In fact, the only time I see it anymore is on the dessert menu: “Sinfully Rich Chocolate Cake.” But for the most part, the word “sin” is still spoken only in the realm of faith.

But the way it is there spoken is problematic. “Sin” is a word that doesn’t need to be rescued from the culture, but from the church itself. As the woman in the earlier story pointed out to me, some churches and pastors have used the word as a weapon to beat people down into submission. Because the word “sin” has been used in such extreme ways, we’ve come to associate “sin” with only the worst of behaviors like murder and sexual perversion. Webster’s defines “sin” as “any reprehensible or regrettable action or behavior; great fault or offense.” We’d never do anything like that, would we?

Of course not, at least not that we’d admit, so we’ve trivialized the word “sin” and found more palatable alternatives to it. I was once told by a minister who was reading over one of my sermons that I shouldn’t use the word “sinfulness,” that it was too

negative. She suggested I used “brokenness” or “shortcomings.” That’s like the doctor who told me he didn’t like to tell family members that a loved one had died; instead, he told them they had “transitioned.” But Paul doesn’t say that all suffer from brokenness and have fallen short of the glory of God; he says all have sinned.

The reality that Paul puts forth is that everyone sins, but because that word has come to mean something depraved and grossly immoral, we do our best to distance ourselves from the word. We’ll go to great lengths to deny the presence of sin in our lives. We call our sins mistakes or imperfections; we will rationalize them by saying, “I’m only human” or “The devil made me do it.” These are ways of avoiding facing the reality of the issue and speaking that dirty “s” word. It’s too frightening to think about. It’s too embarrassing. No one wants to be lumped into the same category as real sinners.

If that happened, if we admitted our sinful nature, people might find out that we’re not the good person everyone thinks we are. Our reputation would be ruined. We’d be kicked out of church, our picture would go up in the post office, people would talk about us in hushed tones: “Remember Kory? Oh, yeah, can you believe it? I thought he was such a nice guy! Who would have guessed that he was really a sinner!”

That’s sounds terrible to say, doesn’t it? Would you ever think of calling someone a sinner? It sounds so judgmental, doesn’t it? That’s where the accepted cultural definition of the word “sin” begins to break down. It’s been given a negative connotation when, in the Bible, it’s spoken of in much different terms.

In the Bible, to be called a sinner was not a judgment; it was simply a factual statement, and assertion about the reality of our human nature and our broken relationship with God. To be a sinner does not necessarily mean you are hypocritical, disgusting or evil. Some of the nicest people I know are sinners, and most of them are sitting in this room right now!

What we need to do is to stop seeing sin as only the most egregious and repulsive acts, and redefine it so that we can all see our culpability. Yes, we are all sinners. I don’t say that to make you feel bad or beat you down; I simply say it because it’s true, and if we are to understand God’s grace and the power of what Christ did for us on the cross, we first have to acknowledge our separation from God and our need for a Savior.

But we are reluctant to do that because we don’t want to think of ourselves as anything other than good people doing our best to live a faithful life. We are hesitant to accept the fact that, no matter how good we are, we still sin. We’re like Charlie Brown when Lucy says to him, “You know what the trouble with you is?” Charlie Brown responds, “No, and I don’t want to know! Leave me alone!” and he storms off. Lucy pauses and says, “The whole trouble with you is you won’t listen about what the whole trouble with you is!”

Part of the reason we resist seeing our sinful nature is that we’ve let sin be defined too narrowly. We think of sinning as doing something terribly wrong, and for the most part we haven’t done anything terribly wrong. But there is more than one type of sin. There are sins of commission, which are doing things we shouldn’t do. But there are also sins of omission, which means not doing something we should do.

To many people misrepresent Christianity as a religion full of “thou shalt nots,” and the belief is if you do good and treat people well and say “Please” and “Thank you” and come to church every once in awhile, you’ll go to Heaven. But as I read the Bible, there are a lot more “Thou shalt” than “Thou shalt nots.” James says in his letter,

“Anyone who knows the good he ought to do, and doesn’t do it, sins.” Part of accepting our sinfulness is not only admitting what we’ve done, but what we’ve left undone.

So when we redefine “sin,” we have to do so in a way that encompasses all the different forms of sin, because the Bible doesn’t make a distinction between types of sin. That’s hard for some of us to accept. There’s no list in the Bible that says murder is a really big sin but telling a lie is only a little sin. In God’s eyes, they are all sins, and no sin is more or less sinful than any others. Our human laws make these kinds of distinctions, which is good and necessary, but God doesn’t. The Bible doesn’t focus on how we’ve sinned, but that we have sinned, and that we cannot escape our sinful nature by ourselves. We need God’s help.

So, how do we redefine “sin”? I came across numerous definitions this week. But as I read and prayed and talked to people, the definition I heard that I believe fits the biblical understanding of sin most closely is this: Sin is a waste. Sin is when we take what God has given us and we fail to use it to bring glory to God. We waste it. We waste our talents, we waste our bodies, we waste our resources. God has given us all these things to use for His glory and His kingdom, and when we choose to use them selfishly, to fulfill our own desires, we waste them. We sin against God.

But God loves us so much that He did something radical to help us break the inertia of sin in our lives: He sent us His son, Jesus. We’ll talk next week about the word “salvation” and how we can redefine it. But for now, if there’s only one thing you remember about this sermon, I hope it’s this: God loves you very much. God’s not waiting for you to screw up so he can strike you with a lightning bolt. Sin is not something to be punished, but something to be healed. Paul says in Romans, “For the wages of sin is transitioning...er...death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Instead of denying our sin, we are called to acknowledge it, then turn to the only One who has the power to forgive us, to make us new, the One who came so that we would know, not death, but know life, and know it abundantly.